

# CHAPTER 1

## FORMATIVE YEARS

I WAS BORN IN LONDON IN MARCH 1948 AND, UNTIL I WAS SEVEN, lived in Willesden, not far from Wormwood Scrubs prison. My father was a civil servant, and travelled to the city each day. Typically for the time, mum, who had worked as a secretary, looked after our small house in Buchanan Gardens after I was born, and never returned to work. I didn't see that much of Dad. I was sent to Furness Road School in Harlesden, known for being one of the London areas where the police operation, 'Trident' is particularly active against gun crime. Out-of-school hours were spent playing in the street, and occasionally fighting with the local kids who were mainly Irish: I generally lost! I remember dad making me cross the road in Harlesden to avoid going near a local pub frequented by Irish labourers. There was still sawdust on the floor, and every now and then fights would spill out onto the street. Nothing much has changed in Harlesden!

When I was seven, we moved a few miles north to a semi-detached house in Kenton, Middlesex, and around this time my younger brother, Jon (Jonathan), was born. In Kenton I went to Priestmead Junior School, and ultimately passed my eleven plus to go on to Harrow County Grammar School. I enjoyed football in the local park and cycled everywhere. I hate to admit it now, but I also spent hours collecting train and bus numbers, and travelled all over London, often with my cousin, Chris Marshall, to do so. Grammar school was a disaster and I failed miserably. My dad was mortified.

At this period of my life I was a great disappointment to my parents, and my mother described me to others as a 'difficult' child! I made few friends at school, and just couldn't absorb the numerous new subjects they tried to teach me there. I guess this was when the attention deficit issues I now know I suffer from reared their heads. Latin and chemistry were a total mystery, and I failed to gain any O'levels at all.

Aged sixteen, it was suggested that I should leave school, and try to start an engineering apprenticeship, to which my father

readily agreed. He found me my first job as a toolmaker at Shipman and Co, an engineering firm in Northwood Hills, located in the basement of a block of flats, with about a dozen employees. I was the only apprentice, so became the 'dogsbody,' tasked with all of the mundane tasks, and not allowed to take on any real technical work. I did attend Harrow Technical College on day release, and over a period of five years, gained City and Guilds Engineering certificates, including a distinction for 'advanced machining,' so I *could* do it if I really applied myself. After at least one change of ownership, Shipman folded and made me redundant four years into my apprenticeship. After more hard work by my dad, the apprenticeship was transferred to Thermo Plastics in Dunstable. My dad's trade was based on furniture and wood, but he thought that plastics were the future.

As soon as I started work at sixteen, I needed my own transport, so dad loaned me the money to buy a Lambretta TV 175 scooter. This served me well and, as a couple of local friends also had scooters, we travelled reasonable distances together in some comfort. One of our crowd, Dick Findlay, had a 250cc Francis Barnett motorcycle, and as soon as I cadged a ride on that I realised that motorcycles — with their larger diameter wheels — were much nicer and safer to ride than scooters.

My girlfriend, Shelagh Walker, loved riding pillion on the scooter. We originally met at a local youth club when we were both fifteen, and enjoyed hanging out together. Our home lives were not easy: both of us suffering from parents who had other stressful issues to deal with. I thought Shelagh was a lovely girl; very pretty, and we were both always extremely happy and relaxed in each other's company: soulmates — which we still are.

The scooter had to go. I'd passed my motorcycle test at the first attempt and, for £68, I bought a 1958 500cc BSA Shooting Star from Rex Judd's shop in Edgware. It was in lovely original condition and suited me fine. The power seemed awesome; Shelagh even liked the comfy dual seat. All this happened in 1964, and the following year I passed my car test and managed to buy a red Morris Minor van for £40. It had a loose sheet of steel beneath the driver's feet to cover up a large hole in the floor, and lengths of scaffolding pipe for bumpers (this was before the MOT test). We didn't keep the Morris for very long, replacing it with a black Ford 100E van that again cost £40. Shelagh soon modified this by backing it into the Armco barrier surrounding the Dominion cinema's car park in Harrow. The 100E van had very small rear windows and, as Shelagh slowly

I drove the car a few times the following spring, and, after he had recovered, took it up to Mick's place in Suffolk for him to inspect. It was not all good news, unfortunately. The car was correct for its year, but the chassis had rotten suspension posts, needing replacement. This meant that the body had to come off, and a new chassis bought and fitted with all the running gear prior to re-installation under the body. This wasn't in the plan, either practically or financially, and it took twelve months to complete the work, aided by a bank loan.

After much discussion it was decided that a Spyder tubular space frame chassis would be the best option. The replacement galvanised sheet steel chassis available from Lotus had a reputation for distorting, and there was no difference in the value of an Elan fitted with either chassis type. The Spyder chassis offered the opportunity to have splined driveshafts instead of the short-lived and difficult to fit rubber doughnut types. It also allowed more adjustment of the wishbones.

I liked these options, so duly collected a new red powder-coated chassis from Mick Miller. I enlisted the help of a few of my neighbours, and after removing all of the fixing bolts, with some difficulty we lifted the body off the chassis and stored it on our patio. The rolling chassis went into my garage workshop, and I spent many happy hours removing anything that could be used in the rebuild.

The motor and gearbox were now easily accessible and quickly removed. The brakes and suspension parts were exposed, and I saved anything serviceable, but scrapped badly-worn or rusty parts.

Fortunately, Lotus had utilised many components from other British manufacturers, and I ordered a lot of small parts from specialist dealers at reasonable prices. I lifted the cylinder head from the motor and had it fettled by a specialist in Oxford. This was quite costly, but all of the car's performance comes from the head, and the rest of the motor seemed in good order.

The gearbox had a non-standard alloy competition bell housing fitted, so I sold that to a Lotus racer and sourced a standard item, making a few bob in the process. I fitted stainless steel braided brake lines, and got Paul Duncombe to turn up some stainless disc brake pistons, as rusting of the standard items was a common problem. I bought a reconditioning kit for the Weber twin-choke carbs and carefully rebuilt them. I also bought a full stainless steel exhaust system and a nut-and-bolt kit for refitting the bodywork and other major parts.

*My Lotus Elan Sprint.*



*Pete Clements on his  
Velocette Thruxton,  
1980.*



*Grass tracking at High Cross, Herts, on my 500cc  
Ansel-Jap, number 28, 1980.  
(Courtesy CH Melhuish)*





## CHAPTER 11

# THE PETTY NORTON

DON WILLIAMSON WAS A FRIEND OF STUART JUKES; BOTH VINTAGE Motorcycle Club pals from the St Albans area and Excelsior Manxman enthusiasts. Don had approached Stuart whilst watching the Manx Grand Prix races in 1997 to say that he would like to get involved with a rider, contributing sponsorship in a small way. The pair discussed several options and, luckily for me, I was selected, I'm told, for my consistent lap times and good bike preparation.

Don owned Braye Precision Ltd, based in North London, which manufactured high precision components, typically for Formula One teams. Don spoke to me after the Senior Classic MGP race, and I readily accepted his kind offer of sponsorship. Don told me he wasn't interested in becoming involved with a reckless or brave rider, and wanted me to carry on, but hopefully with his assistance improving my results. He was especially interested in the Manx GP as he had friends on the island and visited every year. Don thought I had the potential to do well, given a little help.

True to his word, Don's company paid for tyres and other running costs for a couple of seasons, and then, just after the finish of the 2000 Senior MGP race, whilst I was enjoying a pint of Okells in the paddock beer tent, he wandered in and announced that he'd bought me a better bike for the following season. Unbeknown to me, he had been talking to Brian Richards, a well known and respected sponsor, and they had done a deal. Brian had been running a replica Petty Norton since 1997, and had enjoyed considerable success with both Bill Swallow and Bob Jackson racing the bike for him in Manx GP races. The bike had a great history, having won the Senior MGP in 1999 ridden by Bill, and finished second in three other MGP Senior Classic races. It had finished second in the 2000 Singles TT, again ridden by Bill, but utilising a 570cc conversion that involved a special crankshaft.

I was flabbergasted but so excited. I did a bit of networking and spoke to both Bill and Brian. Bill told me that he was a little fed up with the bike consistently leaking oil, and Brian told me that he had originally





1 Gerry Kershaw on the Petty Norton, 2007.

2 On my brand new Marx Norton, Brands Hatch. (Courtesy Russell Lee/ Sport-Pics)

3 Chimay, 2011. TAB Honda in warm up area.

4 Bob and TAB Honda, Chimay, 2010 (engine transplant?)



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*Lansdowne Donington, me 21, Redgate,  
Pete Swallow up the inside again!  
(Courtesy Russell Lee/Sport-Pics)*

*Racing my Manx Norton at Snetterton, eyes closing  
(falling asleep?). (Courtesy Russell Lee/Sport-Pics)*

